

Mark 10:35-45

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” 36 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. 37 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” 38 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” 39 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” 41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

It’s a phenomenon known by many names. Getting ahead. Moving on up. Climbing the corporate ladder. The rat race. It’s the drive to continually get a better status through hard work, networking, promotions, and pay raises, and as a rule Americans love it. There are plenty of reasons why people love status—high salaries, political influence, respect, the list goes on. But the trouble with status is as soon as you complete your struggle to get it, you begin your struggle to keep it. So long as a person is concerned with status, they will have little concern for anything else.

The wonderful thing about the kingdom of God is that there is no rat race. There is no corporate ladder. Status isn’t something that we need to be concerned about in God’s kingdom, because God wants us to be more concerned about service. The Son of Man seeks service, not status. He calls us to serve as he served us, by offering himself as a ransom to God in our place.

Jesus’ earthly ministry was coming to a close. Where once he had preached to crowds of thousands, a great majority of those people had now deserted him. Only a few remained loyal to him. But Jesus’ disciples knew that something important was about to happen—Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, the City of Kings, the city that he had been avoiding because the chief priests and the teachers of the law who lived there had been plotting to kill him.

And so he tells his disciples, “The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” Now, finally, Jesus was going to accomplish his purpose. In only a few days he would suffer and die and rise again to save the world from its sin, and then he would take his place once more as Lord over all.

Now the two Sons of Zebedee, the brothers James and John, were part of Jesus’ “inner circle.” Along with Simon Peter, they were Jesus’ closest disciples and friends. Since Jesus was so close to attaining his kingdom, they made a special request of their Lord: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” They were asking that they be given a place of special status and honor at Jesus’ side.

Naturally, this didn’t go over too well with the other disciples. “What makes them so special?” They probably thought. “Haven’t we been faithful too? What gives them the right?”

But Jesus didn’t bother to sort out which disciples were teacher’s pets. He taught them all a lesson in humility: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” In the kingdom of God, you should be concerned about serving each other. You shouldn’t be worried about having status over each other, like the powerful lords and rulers of this world.

If status-seeking was a problem for Jesus’ disciples, it’s a problem that threatens us as well. Both now and in Jesus’ day, the conventional wisdom is that you need to step on some toes to get ahead. You have to cut your opponent down to keep them where you want them. You need to be cunning and self-promoting if you want to be somebody. It’s all about jostling for first place, defending the greatest territory, and making sure that everyone knows who’s really in charge! Despite differences between Jesus’ day and ours, the final goal of human ambition has always been doing less work for more power, influence, and wealth.

And if you think Christians are immune to all of that, then think again. We have our own ways of “lording it over” each other. Maybe we don’t like the idea of having other people serve us, but it can be hard to convince us to serve others. Rather than take a high position that we can use to serve, are we content to act with false humility and let others serve, while we sit back and watch approvingly? Are we less than faithful in

carrying out our duties at home or on the job, failing to be the best spouse or worker, child or parent, the best servant we can be, while others are left to pick up our slack? Lord forgive us for failure to serve!

Then again, we might consider ourselves and finally say, “You know what? I do work hard! I might not really like my job, but I keep going in on Mondays and do a good job to provide for my family. I try to raise my kids right, send them to a good school, and make sure they learn right from wrong. Or I work hard at school, try to do the best I can and get the best grades I can. I’m active in the church too. I try to find ways to help out, even when I’m not sure I’m going to have the time. Lord knows some days I hardly have enough time to catch my breath!”

And you know what, friends? That’s all great stuff. All of those are fine ways to serve God and those around us. It’s what God expects of us. But really, there’s more to it than that.

The kind of service that Jesus asks from us isn’t the kind of service that you get at your favorite restaurant or retail store. That’s a self-motivated kind of service. That waitress may enjoy serving your food and giving you a good dining experience, but she’ll still take her check home at the end of the week. That cashier may really want to help you find exactly what you need, but he also has to pay the bills. It’s a service that helps others, but they’re gaining something from their service too.

And that’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with being rewarded for faithful service. But when it comes to service in the kingdom of God, the reward is not the point. The kind of service Jesus desires is a *selfless* service. It’s service done out of love for the one being served, for the sole benefit of the one being served, without thought of a reward for the servant.

That kind of service isn’t always pleasant. It’s often painful. The things parents do for their children might come the closest, but how easy is it to serve when the baby is screaming and the kids don’t appreciate everything you do or even listen to what you’re saying? How easy is it to serve when your boss passes you over for that promotion even though you deserve it, or when you didn’t get the job you wanted and needed? When you can’t seem to get good grades, no matter how hard you try, and your teachers don’t see the work you’re putting in, how easy is it to serve? Isn’t it easier to just throw up our hands and say, “Forget it! Forget serving, forget selflessness, I want something for all my hard work! From now on, either I’m making sure I get what I want, or I’m giving up completely on serving!”

And yet Jesus doesn’t tell us, “Serve if others appreciate your service.” He just says, “Serve! Be a *slave!*”

How great is our Lord God, and how worthy our king of all our praise and honor and glory, for he has shown us the way. Despite his authority and lordship over all things, and being the first and greatest of all, the Son of Man did not come to be served, as was his right, but to serve, as was his desire. He made himself a slave to the whole world, as sinful as we are, because by our sin we had become indebted to God.

God gave us his Law to show us how to serve him and each other, but in our proud refusal to serve he said, “You owe me! You have sinned against me, and as your king it is my right to demand payment for your sin. The price that I set for your sin is life itself—for your sin you will certainly die!”

But the Son of Man came to be our servant by giving his life as a ransom. As God demanded payment for our sin, the Son of Man offered himself in our place, saying, “No, Lord, take me instead of them. Take their sin, every bit of it, and put it on my shoulders. Take my life from me so that they can live forever. Whatever they owe you, let me pay it instead. Let me be their servant, their slave, their ransom.” And God, in his infinite mercy, accepted.

This is how Jesus’ love drove him to serve. He selflessly served the sinful, even those who slaughtered him. To the chief priests and teachers of the law who condemned him to death, he remained silent and submitted himself. To all those who mocked him and flogged him and made him bleed, he only bowed his head. To all those who crucified him, to the Romans who pounded in the nails, to the Jews who gave the order, to the disciple who betrayed him, even to you and me who drove him there, he gave up his life and his all on his cross. He traded his life for our eternal life, and to show us that we would live forever, God gave his life back again and lifted him once more into his heavenly kingdom.

This is the service Jesus did for us. And this is the kind of service that Jesus calls us to do, to give of ourselves to one another. With his guiding hand, that’s what we will be, to serve each other lovingly, selflessly, without thought of reward or repayment. If that seems hard to do, just remember—you’re not only serving a fellow human being. You are serving another blood-bought servant of God, one more person for whom the Son of Man was a ransom. That person is precious to God, and they’re precious to you too. Serve them with all your heart.

There’s nothing wrong with working hard to get a better position. Status isn’t a bad thing. The truth is, a person with high status might be in a very good position to serve a large number of people. But in the kingdom of God, we do well to remember *why* we serve. It’s not to get ahead. It’s not to get more recognition

or reward. No, we serve because we love. And we love because Christ loved us first. Lord grant that all of our service reflects our love in action. Amen.

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